

University of Florida investigation finds researchers felt pressured to suppress COVID-19 data, criticisms of Governor Ron DeSantis

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A panel of academic experts at the University of Florida (UF) published a report this week on their weeks-long investigation into various issues pertaining to academic freedom on campus, concluding that UF researchers felt pressured to destroy COVID-19 data and avoid criticizing university and state officials over their disastrous policies during the pandemic.

The six-person panel, made up of a faculty senate committee, was convened last month following UF's decision to bar three political science professors from testifying as expert witnesses in an election lawsuit against the state. The committee's central finding was that fears of upsetting state lawmakers and politicians was rampant among faculty at UF, pointing to efforts by university administrators to coerce faculty from criticizing Governor Ron DeSantis' or UF's policies related to COVID-19 in media interactions.

Researchers and academics were warned throughout the past two years not to use their professional titles or school affiliation in written commentary or to give oral presentations to the media. Faculty at UF Health, a network of hospitals associated with the university, expressed concerns over departmental funding being in jeopardy if they did not adopt the state's stance on pandemic regulations in opinion articles, according to the panel's findings.

The committee received a substantial amount of input from faculty who relayed stories which ranged from attempts to serve as expert witnesses in court cases to other instances that dealt with race and COVID-19 research across disciplines. Members of the panel indicated that outside of the professors who were barred as expert witnesses in November, the committee's findings on academic suppression were so alarming that they decided to hasten the investigation, particularly in regards to the suppression of COVID-19 research data.

In an interview with the *Miami Herald*, Danya Wright, a constitutional law professor and member of the six-person panel, spoke of an "added sense of urgency" to the allegations related to data destruction. Wright said, "COVID research, it is life and death to not be able to do your job." She continued, "to have your research that you've trained for so many years to be able to do, to have that research tabled, put on the shelf and ignored and not get it out there to the academic community to get it out there and see if it's going to do any good."

Additional allegations in the report detailed how professors and

departmental heads were required to restructure course syllabi and change the content of websites to appease UF's administration. Race-related references had to be withdrawn from course materials, which included prohibiting the terms "critical" and "race" from appearing together "in the same sentence or document," according to the committee's report. This restriction specifically targets the teaching of "critical race theory," a body of race-obsessed academic writing that Republican lawmakers have sought to ban through fascistic laws aimed at removing "divisive concepts" from school curricula.

Professor Wright noted an atmosphere of pervasive academic censorship and intimidation that prevailed throughout faculty and research spaces. "More problematic," Wright said, "than the individual examples of pressure to stifle unpopular viewpoints or restrict research was the palpable reticence and even fear on the part of faculty to speak up on these issues." Wright noted that there was "grave concern about retaliation and a sense that anyone who objected to the state of affairs might lose his or her job or be punished in some way. We've reached a point where many faculty feel that wherever this pressure is coming from, it is interfering with our duty and loyalty and commitment and responsibility to seek the truth and make that knowledge available."

University officials declined to comment on the faculty senate report after being asked on Monday. The faculty report states that "the lack of documented rules and procedures" made understanding denials of expert participation in activity outside university boundaries more difficult, meaning professors and researchers have been given little to no explanation for the prohibitions.

Meanwhile, three professors involved in the initial controversy over not being allowed to testify along with three other UF professors have filed a lawsuit in federal court alleging a violation of their First Amendment rights. The original lawsuit, filed by political science professors Sharon Austin, Michael McDonald and Daniel Smith was made on November 5. It named UF President Kent Fuchs, Provost Joseph Glover and the school's board of trustees as defendants after the professors were denied requests to serve as plaintiffs' witnesses in a challenge to a new elections law, SB 90, that places anti-democratic and onerous limitations on vote-by-mail procedures.

An amended complaint filed last week in federal court added law professors Teresa Reid, Kenneth Nunn and Jeffrey Goldhagen, a professor in the university's College of Medicine, as plaintiffs. The

lawsuit alleges that administrators' decisions to prevent faculty members from participating in lawsuits against the state violates First Amendment rights. According to court records, the university told the professors in November that "outside activities that may pose a conflict of interest to the executive branch of the state of Florida create a conflict" for the university. UF along with a slew of other public universities rely on the state legislature for its funding, while the governor has the ability to veto line items in its budget.

Although it is touted as the state's lone "flagship" university, the political and class allegiances of UF's board of trustees are with the fascistic DeSantis administration and Republican Party. Four of the 13 board members responsible for governing UF have been major donors to DeSantis' political campaigns, giving a collective \$661,800 the last few years, according to a review by the *Herald* and *Tampa Bay Times*. Among them are Anita Zucker, a billionaire CEO of South Carolina-based chemicals manufacturer InterTech Group, who is also the richest person in that state. She gave DeSantis' campaign \$100,000 two months after the university's board of governors chose her as a UF trustee in 2019.

Another Republican affiliate on the board is Mori Hosseini, a long-term GOP donor who has given nearly \$112,000 to DeSantis' political committee, either directly or through his companies ICI Homes and Intervest. Hosseini played a critical role in rubber-stamping and fast-tracking the hiring of DeSantis' handpicked surgeon general and head of the state's Department of Health, Dr. Joseph Ladapo, into a highly-paid tenured position at UF's medical school.

Dr. Ladapo was appointed surgeon general shortly after becoming a professor at UF in September. Given the personal strings tying UF's board of trustees and DeSantis' Republican apparatus, there's a definite political connection behind university's decision to suppress COVID-19 research data and block criticism of the catastrophic policies DeSantis has enforced throughout the pandemic.

In fact, Dr. Ladapo was tapped as the state's leading public health "expert" in order to provide a veneer of scientific credibility for the homicidal "herd immunity" pandemic policies that have been carried out by DeSantis and which have allowed the virus to run rampant across the state. Such policies have amounted to a flat-out rejection of lockdowns and closures of non-essential businesses, the resumption of in-person learning in schools and even the prohibition of limited mitigation measures, including county-wide mask mandates and masking within schools.

Despite more than 62,000 deaths and 3.7 million cases, the state's COVID-19 dashboard tracker has been dismantled for months and death counts are no longer reported on a daily basis. Commenting on the emergence of the Omicron variant, which threatens to overwhelm hospitals nationwide even as the Delta variant is surging, DeSantis said the state would not change its policies and derided public health measures to stop the virus as "Fauci-ism," referring to President Joe Biden's chief medical advisor Dr. Anthony Fauci.

Prior to hiring on as a faculty member of UF's College of Medicine, Dr. Ladapo had voiced his opposition to lockdowns and mask mandates. He has made a name for himself since his appointment as surgeon general by promulgating disinformation regarding the safety of COVID-19 vaccines and mask mandates in K-12 schools. Shortly after his appointment, Dr. Ladapo condemned vaccine mandates in workplaces in a news conference by openly doubting the trustworthiness of the health measure and whether the scientific community's claims about the vaccines were credible.

Employing the rhetoric associated with the far-right, Dr. Ladapo declared, "no matter what people on TV tell you, it's not true." He said individuals "hear these stories, people telling you what's been happening in their lives—nurses, pregnant women who are being forced to sort of put something in their bodies that we don't know all there is to know about yet." He remarked further, "Well, guess what? Here we are about 10 months afterward. And we're finding that the data are showing that in some of these vaccines, the protection from infection is less than 40 percent. And even less than that, for some of them." Instead of taking the vaccines, Ladapo concluded people should "stick with their intuition and sensibilities."

This pseudoscientific language runs up against the months-long effort of scientists who have produced countless amounts of empirical evidence and verifiable knowledge on the safety and efficacy of the vaccines. Ladapo cited neither a study nor a credible body of researchers who were also concerned with the health consequences of the vaccine. Instead, he raised skepticism about the "stories" regarding the health benefits of the vaccines, suggesting the public give extra weight to contrarian anecdotes and conspiracy theories while ignoring the research of public health experts. Moreover, it's entirely unclear what Ladapo's 40 percent figure is referring to.

The censoring of dissident views relating to Governor DeSantis and his pandemic policies has not been limited to researchers in academia. Rebekah Jones, a geographer and data scientist who helped build Florida's online presentation of its COVID-19 data, was fired in June 2020 after refusing to manipulate the state's official figures on the virus and support the elimination of lockdowns and other health restrictions. Jones, who continued to raise doubts about the official figures reported by the health department, was angrily denounced by DeSantis for displaying "insubordination" and "blatant disrespect."

After being terminated Jones launched her own website to keep track of Florida's COVID-19 information and eventually became a target for police-state repression. Law enforcement officers raided her home on December 7, 2020, in a violent and fascistic raid, pointing their guns at Jones' husband and children. Police seized all of Jones' technology, including her phone, computers, and other equipment she used to update her COVID dashboard tracker. Comparing the experience to a Nazi-style attack, Jones tweeted shortly after, "this was DeSantis. He sent the gestapo. This is what happens to scientists who do their job honestly. This is what happens to people who speak truth to power."



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